

The Elephant in the Room

Communicating With Kids About the Economy



By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.

Not surprisingly, parents may be reluctant to discuss difficult economic times with their children. Viewed as the province of adult anxiety, the burdens imposed by tumbling stock prices, falling home values, and rising unemployment are a powerful force, with 8 out of every 10 Americans blaming the U.S. economic crisis for much of the stress in their lives, according to a recent poll by the American Psychological Association.

While efforts to protect our kids from the pain may be well intended, chances are the kids already know how their parents are feeling and are accumulating some trickle-down stress of their own (in an ABC News poll conducted last November, 75 percent of 12- to 17-year-olds who said that their parents were worried about the economy also said they were worried themselves).

Still, the economy is often the proverbial elephant in the room.

But remaining silent may do more harm than good. Indeed, children, especially teens, tend to experience more anxiety when obvious financial stressors are left unaddressed.

And stress can have negative effects on physiological and psychological well-being – effects that often manifest themselves in poor decision-making. For example, according to research from SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions), young people who report feeling stressed most frequently are significantly more likely than their less stressed counterparts to say they drink alcohol (40 percent to 29 percent, respectively) or use marijuana (19 percent to 13 percent, respectively).

Those numbers are particularly troubling today, given the high percentage of teens concerned over the economy. On the other hand, good news can be found in the fact that a similar number (70 percent) say they have spoken with their parents about it, according to new survey data posted by the Center for Media Research.

When open, honest dialogue – calibrated for age – about financial challenges and choices provides a realistic, and at the same time reassuring, assessment of the current state of the economy and its impact on the family, young people feel safer, more confident, and more empowered to weather the downturn. No wonder that 47 percent of respondents in the survey said that they would like to talk to their parents more about the issue.

The tough economic times are also leading to cutbacks in some of the activities that keep young people on track and out of trouble. For example, the same poll revealed that 15 percent of teens dropped out of a sport or recreational activity because of financial strain, despite the proven physical and emotional benefits of such pursuits.

Similarly, the American Camp Association notes that some camps are experiencing a downward trending in summer enrollments of 8 to 10 percent – no doubt a tough choice for anxious parents who know firsthand the measurable outcomes of the summer camp experience, including a positive identity; enhanced physical, thinking, and social skills; and an

emphasis on values and decision-making.

Sadly, a child's choices in school may also be curtailed. In August 2008, *Time* magazine reported on school districts across the country eliminating extracurricular activities, cutting back on field trips, and even thinking about dropping one day of classes a week, something 1 in 7 school boards is considering.

And other schools contemplate cutting back on physical education classes and the arts, fearing too little funding and too little time.

So kids are feeling the pinch, too – not just in household budgets that may dictate when they can drive, what they can buy, and even where, or if, they can go to college, but also in play, socialization, and self-expression.

But, even when dollars are short, there remain many viable options to ensure that young people have the opportunity to participate in the types of athletic and recreational activities, art programs, and summer camps that relieve stress and provide healthy youth-development opportunities.

What cannot be overstated is the critical role of parents in communicating that they have a plan in place to deal with whatever a sour economy throws their way and that the underpinnings of familial support, love, and longevity are strong and sound.

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to be sensitive to each child's needs, pointing out that older children will want more details while younger children will benefit most from simpler, shorter pieces of information.

How best to make this happen?

The Academy recommends scheduling regular family meetings to allow ample time for constructive dialogue and to answer questions.

Just be sure to invite the elephant.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman of SADD and author of the new book Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex—What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling, has broad experience as a school psychologist and summer camp director. For more information about SADD, visit sadd.org. For more information about Stephen, visit stephengraywallace.com.

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